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Thiara, Ravi K.

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'Hard, Feisty Women'-'Coping on Your Own': African-Caribbean Women and Domestic Violence

Ravi K. Thiara

Introduction

Intersectionality as a conceptual tool, which gives primacy to women's multiple social dis/location and subjectivities that result from intersecting forms of oppression, has increasingly begun to be used by researchers to examine violence against women (VAW). However, while there has been a great deal of debate since the late 1980s about the concept of intersectionality and its utility in explaining 'difference' between women, it is still a relatively under-developed area within much VAW theory and practice. Indeed, research on issues for minority ethnic women affected by intimate violence and abuse has been fairly uneven. In the UK, the growing body of research on minority ethnic women and VAW has generally tended to focus on particular groups, mainly South Asian women, and on particular issues, mainly domestic violence and culturally specific forms of harm, such as forced marriage, honour based violence and female genital mutilation (Batsleer et al. 2002; Thiara and Gill 2010). It has also highlighted specific pressures (community, family and individual) and social barriers (racism and discrimination) that shape responses to women in such situations. Despite a long history of settlement in the UK, the experiences of African-Caribbean (AC)¹ women affected by domestic violence have largely been absent from or marginal within the debates about VAW and minority ethnic women. It is the aim of this chapter, by

1 African-Caribbean women here includes those women who have 'origins' in the islands of the Caribbean as well as subsequent generations of women classified as 'Mixed Black and White', that is women who may have one parent who is 'Black Caribbean' and the other who is 'White'. Many African-Caribbean women were recruited into industry, catering and public services in the post-war boom, with this migration flow perpetuated by family networks. Women have historically worked long hours in the lowest echelons of the labour market (Byron and Condon 2008). In the UK, the numbers of Caribbean born women recorded as living in the UK by the 2001 census were 137,637; 565,876 people classified themselves in the category 'Black Caribbean', these being a combination of Caribbean born and descendants of the migrant generation.

drawing on research conducted by the author in the UK², to address this omission and present some key issues highlighted about professional responses to AC women as well as women's experiences of violence in their lives³. In particular, it argues that the essentialist racialised construction of AC women as 'strong' and as lacking 'cultural needs' has served to reinforce their inequality and discrimination and to ultimately leave them unprotected from violence and abuse.

Limited knowledge

Clearly, an important aspect of examining AC women's experiences of intimate violence through the intersectional lens is to recognize the added forms of 'violence' and control that racialised women are subjected to by state agencies, including the police and social services (Mama 1989; Razack 1998; Thiara and Gill 2010). There is also, of course, the symbolic violence, of absence and marginality, within much feminist and race/ethnic studies discourse as well as feminist activism. The particularity of AC women's experiences of violence has also tended to be obscured by assertions of the universality of the VAW experience for women, dubbed the construction of a 'collective victimhood' by some (Thiara 2008; Thiara and Gill 2010). While it is indisputable that there are key commonalities in the experiences and impact of intimate abuse on all women, such assertions have, in fact, failed to provide any specific focus on the nature and impact of violence on AC women.

While research remains extremely limited, the first ever study of domestic violence in black communities – African, African-Caribbean and Asian – highlighted the 'brutalisation' of women at the hands of men and statutory organizations, pointing to women's experience of racism shared with black men but the additional violence of men in women's personal lives (Mama 1989; see also Batsleer et al. 2002; Thiara 2006; Thiara and Turner 1998). In looking at the prevailing political conditions which force black women to tolerate high levels of abuse in their personal lives, Mama argued that:

- 2 The qualitative research was conducted in two localities with a high percentage of African-Caribbean groups in the West Midlands, UK with the aim of exploring women's experiences, professional responses and improving services. A total of 26 professional interviews and 22 interviews with women were analysed for this chapter. The range of professionals interviewed included domestic violence support workers, community workers, family support workers, police officers and health professionals. Around a third of those interviewed were AC professionals. Women were aged between 21–54 and had separated from abusive men at the time of interview.
- 3 All of the AC women interviewed had been in relationships with AC men and it is these experiences they spoke about in the interviews.

In the case of black women, male violence in the home is compounded by general societal racism and state repression, to create a situation of multiple oppression and further punishment for those bravely struggling to establish lives for themselves and their children, away from violent men (Mama 1989: xiii).

In the U.S., Richie, in critiquing notions of 'universal risk', has also argued that VAW of 'color' is embedded in issues of structural racism and poverty and made calls for a more complex and contextualized analysis of gender violence which takes account of both historical and contemporary social processes that differentially affect black women (2005: 54). She argues that social disenfranchisement frequently combines with gender inequality to 'lure' black women into seeking respect and 'success' in a socially constructed 'ideal' nuclear family, only to be subjected to men's violence. Moreover, while explanations of this are highly contested, US research shows that both lethal and severe forms of domestic violence are disproportionately high in African-American communities. This is seen, by some, to be the result of socio-economic factors and racialised inequalities within African-American communities – such as poverty related structural conditions, racial and economic isolation, chronic unemployment, social disorganization, lack of involvement in social networks, population and housing density, and family disruption – rather than 'race' (Hampton, Carrillo and Kim 2005: 127).

Following from Mama's earlier research, in relation to VAW in the UK, research on AC women has revealed that they continue to under-utilise mainstream and statutory services, partly for fear of racism and insensitive responses. The limited use of domestic violence services also results from the continuing lack of information about services, negative perceptions about their appropriateness for AC women, and concerns about sharing facilities such as bathrooms and kitchens, which underpin women's concerns about hygiene and privacy (Thiara 2006). When seeking help, AC women are more likely to self-refer and less likely to want a refuge space though stigma and shame particularly prevent older AC women from seeking help for domestic violence (Rai and Thiara 1997; Thiara and Turner 1998). In particular, older women rarely report abuse to the police (Cook et al. 2003). Indeed, the small size and close-knit nature of many AC communities can also influence women's choices in situations of domestic violence. The role of family and friends is also significant as they are likely to be a major source of support for AC women and children, who emphasize resolving their own problems (Thiara 2006).

Responses to AC women – construction shapes protection options

The ways in which AC women, and indeed their communities, are constructed shapes the responses they receive from professionals and agencies when seeking to protect themselves and their children from men's violence. Two factors have been particularly potent in shaping professional responses. First, the normalization of violence, as part of the wider criminalization of black groups, in black communities acts as a barrier to undermine women's attempts to ensure protection against male violence. This normalization of violence appears to lead to a greater tolerance of VAW by agencies and professionals and shapes their responses to women, which are frequently marked by a reluctance to interfere. As a result of inadequate professional responses, AC women have often been left to 'wage a hidden and individualized struggle' against intimate violence (Mama 1989: xvi). Second, the notion of the strong black woman who is 'hard' and 'feisty' has often left women to negotiate services and separation from men without any support being provided. Indeed, the form of the black family has been under research and public scrutiny for decades with attention focused on female headed families and male absence (Reynolds 1997: 97)⁴. This has resulted, according to Reynolds, in two oppositional discourses, that of the lazy, irresponsible and unreliable black man, on the one hand, and of the strong, single and independent 'superwoman' (1997: 97), on the other. While critiqued by many, the construction of the black 'superwoman' is a fiction which has been made popular by the media and supported by academic research on AC's women's role in the labour force, and has significantly affected professional and academic discourse on AC women role and family life. Given its positive connotations, the importance of the image of the strong black woman to AC women's subjectivity has also created contradictions for many women, as discussed in the second part of the chapter.

Although rooted in essentialist and biological explanations, the 'superwoman' stereotype/construction – suggesting that there is something in black women's genetic makeup that predisposes them to be naturally resilient and able to survive and succeed against adversity (Reynolds 1997: 98) – affects the way in which professional responses to AC women are made in the context of VAW. It is often assumed by professionals that AC women are strong, 'give as good as they get' and can thus 'cope' with men's violence, as elaborated further below.

4 This discourse was already constructed in the Caribbean, see Christine Barrow, cited in Byron and Condon (2008) pp.170–174.

Failure to provide protection

It's like if I go to the police they're going to come in and they're going to label me, he's this, she's that and I bet they've done drugs and that. And all the stereotypes and all the historical experiences connecting black people with any outside agency immediately come into play in somebody's head so hence they don't contact them. Because they just think rather than you judge me I'll go to a friend because I know they won't judge me. Whereas they think a police officer will be looking for cannabis and not looking at the fact that I've just been beaten up. (AC professional)

Research has shown that it can take black women much longer to get their needs met by statutory agencies (Mama 1989). This is particularly the case where women are attempting to ensure protection without any support, a situation which is evidently common for AC women who are frequently left to negotiate access to services on their own. For instance, when women are left to navigate the legal process alone, taking legal action can be experienced as an unfamiliar, unsupportive and extremely difficult process – *'you're in a zone that you don't know about, its unfamiliar territory...and what's thrown at you, its quite embarrassing and frightening especially when you're a private person but its something that you have to do'*. While the lack of knowledge and support through legal processes is an issue for many women, this takes on a greater significance for AC women for whom the decision to involve criminal justice agencies, widely perceived to be racist, in 'punishing' black men is an extremely difficult one.

Police responses

I was at my mum's one night, I was at my nan's the next night, my friends the next night. I was sitting outside my friend's house thinking where the hell am I going to go tonight? I phone the police and say I've seen him you haven't made an arrest yet. I was crying and everything and the policeman turned round to me and says *'...I don't think you're as vulnerable as you think you are'*. (AC woman)

The first time it happened I rang the police they said to me it's not enough for us to do anything. And he done it again, I phoned them up and they said all they can do is give me another log number...This third time I rang them again, they came out and I didn't hear nothing from them for about two months so I phoned to see what was happening and a few days later somebody rang me back to say we want another statement off you. After that he phoned me to say [partner] been charged with assault and your court date is such and such a date. When I went to the court

it was bank holiday. The court was locked. After that I rang him I could not get through to him for about a month...eventually when I went to court it was all messy. First of all the statement they gave me wasn't the statement that I'd done, on a computer like they'd typed it over and taken out what they wanted to take out and put in what they want to put in. And my solicitor went round the court trying to chase a hand written one which was more appropriate though bits were still missing... (AC woman)

Police responses to AC women have been identified as particularly problematic and rather than being protective of women have been widely experienced by them as punitive. At best, they are marked by police inaction and, at worst, they construct AC women as 'undeserving victims' as the above words of a woman illustrate. Both serve to compromise the protection of women as violence against AC women is seen as 'less serious' or they are seen to be 'less affected by it'. This acts as an example of how racism and sexism combine to undermine the safety of women and result in differential impacts on AC women.

Professionals who were interviewed considered police responses to AC women as greatly concerning, stating that they 'are not dealt with properly and their situation not taken seriously resulting in a lack of protection for women and women losing faith in the system'. It was further commented that the unequal treatment of AC women 'is so obvious it is unbelievable'. Although the reluctance of AC women to use external services has been widely noted, women experienced negative response from many statutory agencies when they did attempt to use them. This was especially so with the police who, even when contacted by women for help, tended to respond on the basis of stereotypical assumptions and in ways which left women feeling let down. Consequently, the fear of racism and judgement prevented many AC women from seeking subsequent help.

Women tended to use the police at a point of crisis and had clear expectations about the action they wanted taken – *'I wanted him arrested, removed and kept in but they took a statement and let him go'*. However, those women who had contacted the police as their first and only port of call related very negative experiences. Officers were frequently *'very casual and unsympathetic'*, failing to contact women for days and weeks. On telephoning the police after her violent partner turned up at her workplace, a woman was told *'can't you get your family?'* The police sometimes took four to six hours to attend an incident after a report had been made and sometimes women were not contacted by officers for weeks following reports. A statement had not been taken for two weeks after a report of a serious incident. Additionally, women were not allocated an officer and had to constantly chase things to get information. They were not referred to other support services or given such

information, and not asked by officers if they were safe or had concerns about their safety. Given that women's fears about their safety increased after they contacted the police, the ineffective response from the police made them more vulnerable and hence created greater danger – *'every day I was waking up thinking have they done it yet and because I didn't know if they would keep him in or he'd be out on bail I was thinking he'd get me again'*.

Although making the decision to involve the police (and the criminal justice system) had been a difficult one for many women, especially those concerned about 'betraying' black men and the repercussions of this for them and their children, the police attitude resulted in women dropping charges. Many stated they had not been heard and lost faith and could *'see why women don't go through with it'*. This creates a contradiction for AC women who, recognizing the historical surveillance of their communities and the disproportionate arrests/sanctions against black people, are less willing to use the criminal justice system (CJS) as an initial way for protecting themselves. Fear of being disloyal and not wanting to get their partners into trouble with a CJS that already discriminates against black people was a strong factor shaping women's reluctance to go to the police and *'doing things themselves to protect themselves rather than get him into trouble'*. Thus, AC women carry the responsibility for not colluding with a racist state to incarcerate/criminalize black men, despite men's violence towards them. If they do so, it is often a last resort. To be faced by racist and inadequate responses from the police, then, leave women unprotected from intimate violence. In any case, the over-reliance on the CJS as a primary response to domestic violence and to ensuring women's safety has to be reconsidered for black women as it creates concern for such women about state power or 'authorities' encroaching into personal lives (Richie 2005: 50). Indeed, only women with very severe cases tend to pursue action through the CJS and generally regarded the system as *'white, racist and middle class'*.

Greater punitive approaches also by welfare agencies, such as Social Services, to black families have been highlighted by other research (Mama 1989; Quereshi et al. 2000). In relation to Social Services, none of the women in Mama's study who had contact with them reported this as a positive experience, describing their encounters and interventions as more coercive, punitive, and threatening rather than supportive (1989: 96). Housing agencies were also reported to 'pass the buck', and to be insensitive and hostile in their responses, where black women not only had to wait a long time but were frequently offered inferior housing in undesirable areas – *'they always seem to give you the nasty houses'*. This is supported by support services assisting black women who frequently lament the response of housing, not only offering sub standard housing to vulnerable women and children but

also in racist areas which makes racist victimization a high probability. This makes the finding that housing is frequently the main reason for women staying in abusive relationships even more significant for AC women. Moreover, women's reluctance to involve the police, or police inaction, can disadvantage their attempts to get housing if they require evidence of violence.

Assumption about 'lack of cultural needs'

I think there's assumptions made and particularly about black women that the cultural differences aren't there so don't need to be taken on board. With the Asian community we understand that if somebody needs to come into the hostel and if they have religious beliefs and we're not providing for that that's going to be a barrier. I don't think black women are understood in the same way. (Professional interview)

The lack of insight and commitment to AC women's issues on the part of services and professionals, resulting from the assumption that they can cope or that their needs can be responded to through more general responses, was considered to be widespread – *'they don't understand their particular needs and their culture...I remember the word dysfunctional families being used a short while ago'*. The focus on cultural differences and diversity at the expense of racism and equality by service providers particularly tends to disadvantage AC women who are considered not to have 'cultural needs'. This is in contrast, for instance, to South Asian women who are viewed to be dominated by their cultures. This leads to a disregard by service providers of their particular requirements and cultural contexts and results in AC women viewing support services as being inappropriate and something to only be accessed as a last resort. Part of the reason for AC women's cultural needs being overlooked is because they are not as obvious as those of South Asian women, as the following shows:

Not being able to do their own little bit of cooking... because on a Sunday it's such a traditional thing that you have like a punch that's made. But it's made with alcohol. And we had to say well you can't do that because it's a dry project and you can't... it's their tradition and in every black home if you go on a Sunday that's what they've got. They've got rice and peas and your punch. *And it was difficult for them not to do that.*

Part of the reason for this is the crude reduction of 'cultural needs' to language barriers by service providers and thus the assumption that AC women who speak English have no any specific needs. This focus on language and

to some extent religious differences often obscures AC women's requirements, which can frequently be viewed by professionals as '*a weird habit*'.

For a lot of black women that I come across hygiene is a big big issue. There's a different way of doing things from washing clothes to washing dishes to cooking...hygiene has always been something that women come to the office and say I can't cope because of the kitchen, because of the bathroom. (Professional interview)

Moreover, differing ways of expressing and dealing with issues often got misinterpreted or stereotyped by workers without the insight into AC women's 'norms':

If they said something or did something or made a gesture we wouldn't take it to heart because we know that. That's just because of the moment, the heat of the thing, whereas it can be quite intimidating...If you're speaking to a white worker and you raise your voice...aggressive. She's going to want you to back out of the office and come back when you've calmed down. But it might not have meant that she wanted calming down. That's just how she is. But if you've not got an understanding of that then it becomes difficult. (AC professional)

Added to this is the importance placed on the 'unspoken' (gesturing, hissing etc.) as a form of communication for AC people, something again that gets misinterpreted by professionals rather than being seen as a form of cultural expression:

You can go in a room and there are grunts and some moans and some body language that another person from a similar background will understand and somebody else quite easily misinterpret. (AC professional)

Women's responses to their situations – 'strong black woman' protecting her 'race'

What needs to be broken down within the black community is this sense that black women are seen to be strong women and they're expected to be strong women...and there must be a greater sense of failure to admit that you need to go into a refuge or get help...that somehow they have failed because they should be able to deal with these problems on their own. (AC professional)

Clearly, VAW challenges the stereotype of the 'strong' or 'castrating' black woman (Mama 1989: 88). However, the construction of the strong black woman coupled with negative responses from agencies when accessed by AC women, shapes women's reactions to their situations. This coincides with wider pressures on women to minimize the surveillance of men in black

communities, and acts in accordance with men's pressure on women not to disclose their violence and maintain the secrecy of abuse for the sake of the 'race'. All of this serves to constrict women's options and forces them to deal with their situations on their own, further reinforcing the stereotype of the strong black woman whilst normalizing the absence of black men.

As noted earlier, the construction of the strong black woman is central to AC woman's identity and subjectivity and viewed to have great potency, underlined as it is by powerful historical legacies and complex psychological processes. Although the ways in which this plays out in practice are varied, contradictory, and contested, two aspects are examined here. Firstly, as already noted, the myth of the strong black woman results in pressure for AC women to protect their 'race' by not exposing men and their violence to outside agencies and to avoid reinforcing stereotypes. Secondly, it forces women into dealing with intimate violence by themselves or through their networks to show men that they will not be 'ground down' and beaten.

Protecting the 'race'

Just as some South Asian men are asserted to invoke 'tradition', religion or 'culture' to justify and rationalize VAW, some AC men were reported to use 'race' and the history of racism to do so. This places pressure on women to tolerate men's violence, which is explained as resulting from black men's oppression and draws on reductionist accounts of struggle which *'attribute existing black family structures and familial/gender relations to slavery [and] inadvertently portray black people as objects rather than subjects of their cultural development'* (Reynolds 1997: 100). Consequently, VAW remains a 'buried phenomenon' and leads to a 'collusive silence' which protects the abuser and prevents women from accessing help (Mama 1989: 84). Thus, high levels of violence to women are tolerated by their communities and by statutory agencies. In the US, West speaks of a self imposed rule of silence in the name of solidarity within black communities as *'to speak out on violence in families of color too often invited excessive state surveillance and the stigma of community betrayal, not safety'* (West 2005: 157). This is clearly of significance to AC women in the UK as a 'gag order' imposed by women to protect themselves from stereotypes and oppressive social policies equates to community and male pressure to suppress information about domestic violence and leads to women not disclosing their abuse. Despite receiving greater attention, domestic violence still remains something that is generally not spoken about within AC communities as women *'try to keep things secret'* often because of the stigma attached to disclosing abuse.

The ways in which black people are treated in society and the institutional racism they are subjected to is a common thread in women's narratives. Since *'black people get stereotyped a lot'*, this made women reluctant to put themselves in situations where this could happen to them – *'when people know about it they stereotype you as coming from a broken family'*. Not wanting to reinforce stereotypes of black families and black men also led to the view that *'as black people they had dealt with it in their own way'*. Certainly the emphasis by women on independence and sorting things out in their own way is easy to understand when the history of exclusion and racism is considered. Racism and stereotyping are major factors explaining the reluctance of AC people generally and women experiencing abuse in particular to seek help from agencies perceived to be white and discriminatory. However, simply assuming that AC women do not seek outside help because of racism is also too simplistic as there are clearly a range of complex personal and social reasons for women not doing so.

Moreover, the stereotype of female headed families where men are largely absent and where black children, particularly boys, are growing up without fathers, can lead AC women to remain in abusive relationships to ensure their children have fathers, something that is commonly used by abusive men. However, in their attempts to ensure fathers in children's lives and challenge stereotypes, AC women endure years of post-separation abuse from men who make demands over contact with children but use this to continue their violence against women (Thiara and Gill 2011).

Shame

If you're already told that your black men are criminals, are drug pushers, are this and that, then you're actually having to come and say he is, you're reluctant to do it. (AC woman)

Shame is a significant factor for AC women in both naming their abuse and taking steps to deal with it. In particular, the fear of shaming the family and the 'race' was a large issue and this was especially seen to be the case for women when deciding whether to press charges. Taking action against black men was considered to bring shame on black people while pressing charges or going through the courts or exposing abuse within the community was seen to be shameful for the family – *'she didn't want to bring shame on the family and her mum who was alive at the time but she did go to court and she did press charges once her mother passed away'*.

Responses to men's violence by younger women were considered to be different from those of older women, a generational effect and not an effect

of age as this generation settled in Britain with the model of bourgeois family as the norm (Byron and Condon 2008: 188–192). Younger women were seen as being more willing to take steps to tackle domestic violence. Shame was seen to be a bigger factor for older women:

It's like how did I let this man do this to me at my time of life. And how did I get myself into this situation. And how can I face my church members. Because if they're church goers it's very difficult for them to walk into church and they know that you're not living with your husband. You know your church is where you go and meet your friends and where you talk about things. But you don't want people talking about you because that's a shame thing. (AC professional)

Thus, the many dilemmas for AC women centre around the extent to which they compound the construction of their communities (men) as criminals and families as dysfunctional by being vocal about their experiences of domestic violence. This was an argument used by many men to keep women in situations of abuse by asserting that *'she will bring shame on black people'*.

Doing it their own way/coping on your own

Sometimes women aren't even aware, they wouldn't class it as that because people's perception and understanding and definition of domestic violence in different communities is different and some people will feel that unless men have physically assaulted them, it's not domestic violence, that it's just life, it's just pressure and that's just how men are. (AC professional)

Because they saw themselves as strong women to whom such things did not happen, many women remained in denial about their experiences of intimate abuse. When this was asserted by some women, this had the effect of silencing other women who feared being judged as weak if they disclosed abuse.

For women already reluctant or not at a stage of being able to name abuse, this especially resulted in an obscuring of their experiences with many believing they were not experiencing domestic violence. Sometimes women equated domestic violence with *'a black eye'* and did not immediately recognize their own experiences of verbal and emotional abuse as domestic violence. It was stated that *'perhaps its cultural differences...black women don't see being told that you can't go out or financial abuse as domestic violence....so its about whether you believe it yourself'*.

An associated idea, that of 'being a good woman' can also have much currency in some AC communities, where putting up with abuse signaled that a woman should be praised for being strong enough to live with these hardships, as captured in the following:

Something I hear banded around a lot in the black community is what a good woman is. And I've certainly heard people saying that I know I'm a good woman because I have put up with the violence... There seems to be some credibility that goes with that, that you might have had it hard and you might not have been in a good relationship but if you're coping that's a sign of how strong you are and how good you are. (AC professional)

In relation to AC men and their violence, *'being a strong woman and not letting them take all your dignity away from you'* was a pervasive belief among AC women. This sometimes resulted in women tolerating high levels of violence from men to show them that they would not be *'beaten down by men'*.

Relying on family and friends

I think women feel that they should be able to sort things out for themselves, that their family should support them. They don't like to go into a kind of institution where they have to obey the rules and regulations and structures. It's also a bit of a stigma.

A consequence of *'dealing with it in their own way'*, being a strong black woman, and experiences of racism from service providers was the reliance by AC women on family and friends to assist them with men's violence.

Unlike some women who cannot turn to their family and friends for support, AC women commonly used their families:

Within the Afro-Caribbean community there's always a sense of family, so that if you have a problem you can go to some part of your family because you could expect for someone to put you up for a few nights or whatever or as long as it takes for you to get yourself straightened out. (AC professional)

Only when they were unable to rely on their family and friends was it considered likely that AC women would access outside help. In part, concerns about privacy and that AC women *'don't like a lot of people knowing about their business'* led to women making decisions about seeking external help. This sense of privacy was also bound up with a deep rooted suspicion of statutory services with the following being a common comment made: *'They're very private in that sense and they're very suspicious of services like social services, the police and they're very fearful that all those things [information about abuse] are going to be passed over'*.

Conclusion

Women's location within intersecting systems of oppression and intersectional discrimination determines their experiences of violence, societal perceptions of the deserving 'victim' and women's access to help, protection and justice. This chapter has argued that the construction of AC women as 'strong' and 'hard' by key professionals such as the police contradicts the stereotype of a victim, leading to them being viewed as less deserving of protection and less severely affected by the violence. This serves to undermine their attempts at protecting themselves and their children from male violence in their intimate relationships. It has also been argued that although AC women are reluctant to involve external agencies when they do seek assistance, often at a point of crisis or as a last resort, they are faced with insensitive and discriminatory responses. This has to be understood, in part, in the context of the historically oppressive relations of the British state to black women. The construction of the strong black woman not only shapes professional responses but is central to women's own, where they are likely to maintain the secrecy of abuse as a way of protecting black men, the 'race' and their own identity as a strong woman who will not be beaten down by men's violence. Despite these numerous pressures, AC women are not helpless to their abuse but build protective factors and seek help in a range of ways. Clearly, some contact support organizations and even the police while others draw on support from within their own family and friendship networks to resolve issues. What is clear is that although it is widely assumed that AC women are choosing to cope on their own, some were doing so because of the inappropriate and often negative responses they received from agencies they approached for help, something that has to be considered in future responses to AC women dealing with men's violence in their lives.

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